

Against the Grain

Volume 29 | Issue 5

Article 14

November 2017

ATG Interviews Ann Michael, President and Founder, Delta Think

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Recommended Citation

Strauch, Katina and Gilson, Tom (2017) "ATG Interviews Ann Michael, President and Founder, Delta Think," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 29: Iss. 5, Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7842>

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President and Founder, Delta Think

by **Tom Gilson** (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

and **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: Ann, you founded Delta Think after working in a number of different industries. What was it about the scholarly communications industry that compelled you to strike out on your own?

AM: My first job in scholarly communications was with a commercial publisher. They published their own journals as well as many titles in partnership with professional societies and associations.

I had never interacted with mission-focused organizations and I enjoyed it immensely. I'd been working through major changes in different industries for years and scholarly communications was a new frontier.

Unlike the other industries, scholarly communication had the potential to impact health and the medical profession, to stimulate and promote discovery, and to expand what we know about human behavior. The missions were big, global, and hugely impactful and I quickly knew that I wanted to stay here as long as possible.

Working for a publisher struggling with digital transition made it clear to me that I could have an impact (having a user-focused technology background) and that my impact could be increased if I worked with many organizations and learned more about how they operated and fit together. So, I jumped ship!

ATG: When was Delta Think started and what funding/support did you draw on? Who are the main members of the Delta Think team?

AM: Delta Think had two beginnings! The first one was in 2005 when I started Delta Think as an independent freelance consultant. Like many people that venture out on their own, I vacillated between thinking that I wanted to consult and I wanted a full-time position with a company. In 2008, I accepted a position as President of Information and Media with a content management system provider.

A little over a year later, I realized that I did want to consult but I didn't want to do it alone. August of 2009, I dusted off the Delta Think brand and started again, this time with the mission of building a team. The core members of our team include (in order of appearance!): Mark Jacobson, Mike Sherlock, Bonnie Gruber, Brian Lamont, Nicole Sherlock, Lori Carlin, Deni Auclair, Dan Pollock, and Emma Green.

As for funding, the beauty of starting a services company is that you don't require funding. It's more about timing. Get work, get paid, repeat. We added employees as we increased our work, funding ourselves as we grew.



We've also recently self-funded our expansion into products, with the January 2017 launch of the Delta Think Open Access Data & Analytics Tool.

ATG: Expanding into product development must have been an exciting challenge. Can you tell us more about your new open access data and analytics tool? How would you describe your target market? What unique benefits does it provide for interested clients? Is it available to libraries? What will it cost?

AM: Yes, it has been an exciting challenge to build a product!

The idea for the Delta Think Open Access Data & Analytics Tool (OA DAT) originated with questions arising during consulting engagements. We found commonality in questions clients asked about OA, with no clear consolidated, reliable data source to address them. We saw an opportunity to serve the industry more effectively by curating such a data set, and supplementing it with analysis, commentary, and visualizations — and putting workflows in place within Delta Think to continually update the underlying data and analysis.

The tool has been designed to accommodate any level of data analysis capability or bandwidth. Users can read it i.e., use it as a living report (versus a report only offered annually or bi-annually), interact with it by dicing and slicing data in various ways within the visualizations we provide, or download data for use in conjunction with other internal sources.

Our initial target market was publishers (society, association, and commercial) formulating their OA strategy, benchmarking their current OA portfolio, or staying informed on OA developments more generally. However, as the data and analysis has grown, we've started to add features that also meet the needs of academic institutions. For example, we added a compliance analyzer that allows the user to cross reference funder requirements with publisher practices, compare requirements of different funders, or compare practices of different publishers.

The product is offered via a subscription model and pricing varies based on how the user is interested in accessing the data. We also offer a free monthly Open Access News & Views email. Anyone can register to receive the email.

ATG: On your website, you say "At Delta Think, we help publishers, membership organizations, and information providers anticipate, create, and manage change." There is no mention of librarians. Why? Or are librarians the "information providers?"

AM: That is a great question! Historically librarians have been our customers' customers. We have engaged with librarians when doing market research, but they have never been our direct customer. I do see that changing.

With the launch of the Delta Think Open Access Data & Analytics Tool we have begun to explore how information on Open Access can support librarians as they support their constituencies.

I'm also excited by the presence of librarians at some of the publishing-focused meetings I've attended. The Society for Scholarly Publishing (SSP) has been making a concerted effort to understand and address the needs of librarians not only in their historical role, but also in their evolving roles with institutional archives, and other functions traditionally considered within the realm of publishers.

ATG: What companies do you consider your competitors?

AM: Also, a great question and a difficult one to answer. In our space, no two companies line up neatly as competitors. There is no one out there that does exactly what we do and, conversely, we do not do exactly what other firms in our space do. There are also many freelance consultants, but we consider them more of a resource than competition. We will regularly refer work to other consultants and consulting firms and we regularly receive those referrals as well.

continued on page 42

ATG: *Since 2005, you've grown the company from a single consultant to a hybrid team of staff and trusted associates. What are the keys to your success? Was there a single event/accomplishment that signaled Delta Think was here to stay?*

AM: I feel we're still on the road to that success, but thank you!

What's worked so far is our 51/49 formula. Let me explain. Customers and their satisfaction with our work is the most important thing. However, that satisfaction can't come at the expense of unhappy or overworked consultants, whether they are employees or affiliates. Building and supporting a high-quality team is almost as important as exceeding customer expectations. In that context, **Delta Think** success is 51% client satisfaction and 49% consultant satisfaction.

What makes consultants happy? Fair pay, diverse project opportunities, the ability to both apply their knowledge and to build new skills, the support of a skilled team, a collaborative culture, and an overall respectful working environment.

We are only as good as the professionals that want to work with us!

ATG: *What major challenges did you overcome to grow the company? What have been your biggest rewards? What accomplishments are you most proud of?*

AM: Wow — where to start?

Most recently, our biggest challenge has been "eating our own dog food." We have advised clients on product development efforts for years. We've even participated in their implementation and conversion to ongoing operations, but launching a product ourselves over the course of the last 12 months (while continuing to have our "day jobs") has been a tremendous learning experience. It was a constant challenge to follow our own advice. It has made us all a bit more understanding of the demands and challenges that product teams face. Launching this product and continuing its ongoing development post-launch has been incredibly rewarding.

What am I most proud of? As I had mentioned earlier, in 2009 **Delta Think** was focused on building a team. Almost right out of the gate, I enlisted the support of associate consultants. My proudest professional moment was when I hired **Mark Jacobson** as employee #1! **Delta Think** hadn't had employees and yet **Mark** trusted me. He trusted that **Delta Think** would be healthy and grow and that he could rely on it — on me.

ATG: *Why the name Delta Think? What does it signify?*

AM: One day in 2005, I was sitting at the computer trying to find a URL that wasn't taken. I wanted to emphasize the concept of change and how everyone should have an active role in changing their own environment. After several iterations, I found **Delta Think** was available and I grabbed it!

Much to my surprise, I was also able to get **ManageToChange.com**. **Manage To Change** is our tagline and it's something we view as proactive not reactive. In many ways I consider it part of our name and it certainly is at the core of our mission.

ATG: *Your website lists a number of services that Delta Think provides to the scholarly communications community. But how would you describe Delta Think's overall mission and what do you count as your primary services? Why would a scholarly publisher or information provider seek out your help?*

AM: **Delta Think** is fundamentally positioned to support organizational transformation and growth. That is our mission, helping organizations "manage to change." The beauty of our mission is that it means we must also change and grow to support evolving needs.

We work at the intersection of content, technology, the market, and the user.

Our primary consulting services include: 1) Market research and analysis (know your customer and market), 2) Business, product, and digital strategy (know who you are and where you're going), and 3) Assessment, Roadmapping, and Implementation (know where you are and how you will reach your destination). As you pointed out in your question, there are many "sub-services" under each of these areas.

As for our own evolution, we believe that it is critical for our clients to increase their use of data in process, product, and business evaluation and decision-making.

We have spent the last year building data analytics capabilities and are continuing to build those skills. We launched the **Delta Think** Open Access Data & Analytics Tool earlier this year to address the commonality we saw in questions our customers had about open access. Seeing no clear, consolidated, reliable data source to address these questions, we decided to build one.

ATG: *Are your "customers" largely publishers? Who are your primary "customers"?*

AM: Our customers are primarily not-for-profit societies and associations (although we do work with aggregators, commercial publishers, and some educators). Our work with them has evolved from being 100% publishing focused several years ago to being more holistic, considering all the many products, services, and interactions they have with their members/customers and helping them bring all their assets and capabilities to bear when addressing customer needs.

ATG: *What is the "niche" that Delta Think wants to fill?*

AM: We strive to consistently deliver actionable insights and strategies that enable organizations in scholarly communications to excel and grow. Our niche is being technology savvy and execution focused.

Our fundamental strength is enabling relationship-focused organizations to understand customer needs and successfully assess and apply technology in defining, creating, and managing digital environments that exceed their customers' expectations.

ATG: *Some see libraries as having a diminishing role in the future of the scholarly communications marketplace, or no role at all. As you advise your clients, what do you tell them about libraries? Where do you think libraries currently fit in the market? What about in two to five years?*

AM: This is a very tough question, as I am not an expert on libraries or librarianship. From the perspective of the library, aside from an ever-increasing need to help researchers sift the wheat from the chaff (search and discovery), the library seems like the perfect place to manage not only subscriptions, but also APC funding for open access article publication. I can also see the library having a continually closer relationship with research offices, assisting them in finding the best avenues for their research.

Although you didn't specifically ask about librarians, I can tell you that some of our best partners have degrees and experience in library sciences. We often work on information architecture, taxonomies, and content enrichment efforts and no one on the team is better at this than the librarians! With the unrelenting growth of the web and digital assets, I selfishly hope more librarians take this path.

ATG: *When you look at the scholarly communications landscape, where do you see the most opportunity for innovation? What will be required of an organization to take advantage of these opportunities?*

AM: It sounds like you've been reading *Ask The Chefs* on the Scholarly Kitchen! One of our more recent questions was: If You Were A VC Investing In Scholarly Communications, Where Would You Be Placing Your Bets?

My bets would be on any innovations that mobilize, normalize, and democratize data. Data about research, data about researchers, data on funding, data on collaborations, preferably data at an industry level, you name it. I believe that innovation will come from an understanding of the entire scholarly communications ecosystem and that requires data. Organizations must increase their comfort level with managing, sharing, and analyzing data to understand how their customers and constituents interact with them and the ecosystem overall.

ATG: *In another interview, you said that resistance to change was a key obstacle for many organizations. What strategies have you found most effective in overcoming that barrier?*

AM: Ah — you've hit on my favorite subject. The most important thing to remember when encountering resistance to change is that not all resistance is bad.

The true "obstacle" is how resistance is perceived, managed, and addressed, not the resistance itself. Let me explain.

Often, it's the change initiative or how it's being managed that's the problem.

It could be that the change itself or its impact is not well-defined. How many of us have worked in environments where an

continued on page 44

Interview — Ann Michael
from page 42

executive has attempted to adopt every new management theory or technology that comes along? Or where someone tries to implement a practice that worked in their previous job without adapting it to their new organization?

If the change is needed, there may be a problem with the implementation or communication plan. Maybe you're planning to bring a new product to market too late or too early or without a full view of the impact it may have on resources. Maybe there are parts of the organization impacted by the change that weren't identified or consulted.

For the most part, most people in an organization are trying to perform their role as best they can. We've found most folks are knowledgeable people that are willing to collaborate and make the effort successful. What is perceived as resistance is often their identification of issues or constraints that must be reworked or removed. In those cases, a blind adherence to a previously constructed implementation plan is the problem. Ironically, sometimes it's the people initiating change that are the most resistant to changing their approach!

That said, there are some folks that just can't get on board with a necessary change in direction, but in our experience, they are the minority.

ATG: *As you survey the current state of the industry, what do you think are the most critical issues we face?*

AM: Our most critical issue is our capacity for change. Evolution in technology and user behavior (researcher, author, reader, student, faculty, librarian, publisher, editor, etc.) has made many of our current practices obsolete or unproductive. The system and interactions that have become the norm was appropriate for the state of our tools and evolution when

it was built, but times have changed. That said, there is value in many of our practices that, when reimagined, needs to be retained in some form. The problem is that sometimes we have difficulty talking with each other to identify and agree upon the value. Some of our debates are healthy, but some are polarizing and unproductive, where people on both sides of an issue become entrenched or immovable.

From a publisher's perspective, I think that's why we're seeing many innovations come from smaller groups or from outside of what we may have considered our industry.

If we are to succeed and innovate, we're going to have to do it together and we're all going to have to realize that the result of our evolution will not be exactly what any one group wanted, it will hopefully be the right mix of ideas that's best for the industry's progression overall.

On a more concrete note, one area where we could vastly improve to the benefit of everyone in the ecosystem is with our usage and sharing of data. I know I sound like a broken record here, but decision-making is art and science and, as someone on my team likes to say, it's time we added a little more science! Also, as an industry we are unable to truly get to the bottom of volume and revenue trends, and the nuances of how different publication payment models impacts the industry because we are often using something as a proxy (e.g., we only count indexed articles, we look at publisher list prices for APCs but there is no reliable data on discounts and waivers, etc.).

ATG: *What are the most viable responses to the problems these issues pose? From publishers? From librarians?*

AM: Well, trust, respect, and tolerance for different approaches to issues and opportunities would begin to address the first part of my last response. Perhaps trust and respect can best be built by trying to establish strong cross-industry relationships (not just with folks like

us, but especially with folks that have different perspectives).

When it comes to our ability to share and analyze data all I can say is standards, standards, standards! Part of the reason we have difficulty sharing data is that we lack a full set of standards to compare like to like. We've seen this while building our OA Data & Analytics Tool. We need to support organizations like **CrossRef**, **ORCID**, and **NISO** to continue to build out the crosswalks between our data.

ATG: *Running a company like Delta Think demands a lot of time and energy. But everyone needs some down time to stay sharp. How do you relax and get recharged? Are there specific fun activities that you enjoy?*

AM: That's a great question. I wish I could tell you of some amazing and novel hobbies that I have, but the truth is family, animals, beaches, and mindless stories.

I have three kids ranging from their early to late 20s (she'd kill me if she saw the word "late," so let's say upper middle). They're at a great stage in their lives, starting jobs and starting families, and it is tons of fun to help them think through their challenges. My grandson was born in October of 2016 and it has been a joy playing with him and watching him grow. It's also been an indescribable experience to watch my daughter become a mom!

On the pet front, I have a 4-year-old chameleon named Olive. She is a hobby on her own, just making sure her environment is appropriate and she stays healthy. She's also fascinating to watch and a big departure from furry mammals! Although we did just recently get two kittens, Ziggy and Jones. No one can play like a cat — they are quite entertaining!

ATG: *Ann, we really appreciate you making time in your busy day to talk to us. Thank you so much.*

AM: Thank you, **Tom** and **Katina**. It's been a pleasure! 🐾

Wryly Noted — Books About Books

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Literary Wonderlands: A Journey Through the Greatest Fictional Worlds Ever Created, **Laura Miller**, General Editor. (ISBN: 978-0-316-31638-5 Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers; New York, 2016.)

What could *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Beowulf*, and *Infinite Jest* all have in common?

These five titles are part of over one hundred books that make up a new compendium of imagined worlds contained in the publication, **Literary Wonderlands**, edited by **Laura Miller**, co-founder of *Salon Magazine* and authored by forty literary experts drawn from colleges

and universities in all parts of the world. Many of the authors have specialties in medieval and ancient history, science fiction and fantasy, and children's and young adult literature. The book is beautifully illustrated with art work from the first editions or later exemplary versions, such as **Edward Burne-Jones'** tapestry realized by **William Morris & Co.** for *Le Morte D'Arthur* or movie posters and cover art for *1984*, *I, Robot*, and *Planet of the Apes*.

Literary Wonderlands could pass for an entertaining coffee table book, but should instead be considered as a checklist and guide to essential utopian, dystopian and speculative fiction that you have always been meaning to



read. If you have read these books already, whether as a child, teenager, or student, you will find that the essays are concise summaries and refreshing new looks at reading you have previously enjoyed and want to re-live.

I found that the attention to detail in the examinations of the story telling was a great way to jog my memory and bring old classics back to life. The chronological listing and grouping by era put them in context with their kindred

continued on page 46